

Communication Skills Introduction and Overview

HOW THIS WORKBOOK CAME TO BE, MY QUEST FOR THE SEVEN CHALLENGES,
AND HOW WE BENEFIT FROM A MORE COOPERATIVE
STYLE OF LISTENING AND TALKING

Searching for what is most important. This workbook proposes seven ways to guide your conversations in directions that are more satisfying for both you and your conversation partners. I have selected these suggestions from the work of a wide range of communication teachers, therapists and researchers in many fields. While these seven skills are not *all* a person needs to know about talking, listening and resolving conflicts, I believe they are a large and worthwhile chunk of it, and a great place to begin.

The interpersonal communication field suffers from a kind of “embarrassment of riches.” There is so much good advice out there that I doubt than any one human being could ever follow it all. To cite just one example of many, in the early 1990s communication coach Kare Anderson wrote a delightful book¹ about negotiation that included one hundred specific ways to get more of what you want. The problem is that no one I know can carry on a conversation and juggle one hundred pieces of advice in his or her mind at the same time.

So lurking behind all that good advice is the issue of priorities: What is most important to focus on? What kinds of actions will have the most positive effects on people’s lives? This workbook is my effort to answer those questions. My goal is to summarize what many agree are the most important principles of good interpersonal communication, and to describe these principles in ways that make them easier to remember, easier to adopt and easier to weave together. Much of the information in this workbook has been known for decades, but that does not mean that everyone has been able to benefit from it. This workbook is my contribution toward closing that gap.

How we benefit from learning and using a more cooperative style. I have selected for this workbook the seven most powerful, rewarding and challenging steps I have discovered in my own struggle to connect with people and heal the divisions in my family. None of this came naturally to me, as I come from a family that includes people who did not talk to one another for decades at a time. The effort is bringing me some of each of the good results listed below (and I am still learning). These are the kinds of benefits that are waiting to be awakened by the magic wand... of your study and practice.

Get more done, have more fun, which could also be stated as better coordination of your life activities with the life activities of the people who are important to you. Living and working with others are *communication-intensive* activities. The better we understand what other people are feeling and wanting, and the more clearly others understand our goals and feelings, the easier it will be to make sure that everyone is pulling in the same direction.

More respect. Since there is a lot of mutual imitation in everyday communication (I raise my voice, you raise your voice, etc.), when we adopt a more compassionate and respectful attitude toward our conversation partners, we invite and influence them to do the same toward us.

More influence. When we practice the combination of responsible honesty and attentiveness recommended here, we are more likely to engage other people and reach agreements that everyone can live with, we are more likely to get what we want, and for reasons we won’t regret later.²

More comfortable with conflict. Because each person has different talents, there is much to be

¹ Kare Anderson, *Getting What You Want*. New York: Dutton. 1993.

² Thanks to communication skills teacher Dr. Marshall Rosenberg for this pithy saying.

gained by people working together, and accomplishing together what none could do alone. But because each person also has different needs and views, there will always be some conflict in living and working with others. By understanding more of what goes on in conversations, we can become better team problem solvers and conflict navigators. Learning to listen to others more deeply can increase our confidence that we will be able to engage in a dialogue of genuine give and take, and be able to help generate problem solutions that meet more of everyone's needs.

More peace of mind. Because every action we take toward others reverberates for months (or years) inside our own minds and bodies, adopting a more peaceful and creative attitude in our interaction with others can be a significant way of lowering our own stress levels. Even in unpleasant situations, we can feel good about our own skillful responses.

More satisfying closeness with others. Learning to communicate better will get us involved with exploring two big questions: "What's going on inside of me?" and "What's going on inside of you?" Modern life is so full of distractions and entertainments that many people don't know their own hearts very well, nor the hearts of others nearby. Exercises in listening can help us listen more carefully and reassure our conversation partners that we really do understand what they are going through. Exercises in self-expression can help us ask for what we want more clearly and calmly.

A healthier life. In his book, *Love and Survival*,³ Dr. Dean Ornish cites study after study that point to supportive relationships as a key factor in helping people survive life-threatening illnesses. To the degree that we use cooperative communication skills to both give and receive more emotional support, we will greatly enhance our chances of living longer and healthier lives.



Respecting the mountain we are about to climb together: why learning to talk and listen in new ways is challenging. I hope putting these suggestions into practice will surprise you with delightful and heartfelt conversations you never imagined were possible, just as I was surprised. And at the same time, I do not want to imply that learning new communication skills is easy.

I wish the skills I describe in this workbook could be presented as "Seven Easy Ways to Communicate Better." But in reality, the recommendations that survived my sifting and ranking demand a lot of effort. Out of respect for you, I feel the need to tell you that making big, positive changes in the way you communicate with others will probably be one of the most satisfying and most difficult tasks you will ever take on, akin to climbing Mt. Everest. If I misled you into assuming these changes were easy to make, you would be vulnerable to becoming discouraged by the first steep slope. Forewarned of the amount of effort involved, you can plan for the long climb. My deepest hope is that if you understand the following four reasons why learning new communication skills is challenging, that understanding will help you to be more patient and more forgiving with yourself and others.

First of all, learning better communication skills requires a lot of effort because cooperation between people is a much more complex and mentally demanding process than coercing, threatening or just grabbing what you want. The needs of two people (or many) are involved rather than just the needs of one. And thinking about the wants of two people (and how those wants might

³ Dean Ornish, MD, *Love and Survival*. New York: HarperCollins. 1998. Chap. 2.

overlap) is a giant step beyond simply feeling one's own wants.⁴

The journey from fighting over the rubber ducky to learning how to share it is the longest journey a child will ever make, a journey that leads far beyond childhood. Reaching this higher level of skill and fulfillment in living and working with others requires effort, conscious attention, and practice with other people.

A second reason that learning more effective and satisfying communication skills does not happen automatically is that our way of communicating with others is deeply woven into our personalities, into the history of our hearts. For example, if, when I was little, someone slapped me across the face or yelled at me every time I spoke up and expressed a want or opinion, then I probably would have developed a very sensible aversion to talking about what I was thinking or feeling. It may be true that no one is going to hit me now, but a lot of my brain cells may not know that yet. So learning new ways of communicating gets us involved in learning new ways of feeling in and feeling about all our relationships with people. We can become more confident and less fearful, more skillful and less clumsy, more understanding of others and less threatened by them. Changes as significant as these happen over months and years rather than in a single weekend.

A third side of the communications mountain concerns self-observation. In the course of living our attention is generally pointed out toward other people and the world around us. As we talk and joke, comfort others and negotiate with them, we are often lost in the flow of interaction. Communicating more cooperatively involves exerting a gentle influence to guide conversations toward happier endings for all the participants. But in order to guide or steer an unfolding process, a person needs to be able to observe that

⁴ I am grateful to the books of developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, (both Harvard Univ. Press) for introducing me to the idea that cooperation is more mentally demanding than coercion. After that idea, nothing in human communication looked the same.

process. So communicating more cooperatively and more satisfyingly requires that we learn how to participate in our conversations and observe them at the very same time! It takes a while to grow into this participating and observing at the same time. At first we look back on conversations that we have had and try to understand what went well and what went badly. Gradually we can learn to bring that observing awareness into our conversations.

A final reason (four is surely enough) that learning new communication skills takes effort is that we are surrounded by a flood of bad examples. Every day movies and TV offer us a continuing stream of vivid images of sarcasm, fighting, cruelty, fear and mayhem. And as beer and cigarette advertisers have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, you can get millions of people to do something if you just show enough vivid pictures of folks already doing it. So at some very deep level we are being educated by the mass media to fail in our relationships.⁵ For every movie about people making peace with one another, there seem to be a hundred movies about people hacking each other to death with chainsaws or literally kicking one another in the face, which are not actions that will help you or me solve problems at home or at the office. Learning to relate to others generally involves following examples, but our examples of interpersonal skill and compassion are few and far between.

These are the reasons that have led me to see learning new communication skills as a demanding endeavor. My hope is that you will look at improving your communication skills as a long journey, like crossing a mountain range, so that you will feel more like putting effort and attention into the process, and thus will get more out of it. Living a fully human life is surprisingly similar to playing baseball or playing the violin. Getting better at each requires continual practice. You probably already accept this principle in relation to many human activities. I hope this workbook will encourage and support you in

⁵ For an extended examination of this issue, see Sissela Bok, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1998.

applying it to your own talking, listening and asking questions.

Seven ways of being the change you want to see. Because conversations are a bringing together of both persons' contributions, when you initiate a positive change in your way of talking and listening, you can single-handedly begin to change the quality of all your conversations. The actions described in this work-book are seven examples of "being the change you want to see" (a saying I recently saw attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, the great teacher of nonviolence).



While this may sound very idealistic and self-sacrificing, you can also understand it as a practical principle: model the behavior you want to evoke from other people. The Seven Challenges are also examples of another saying of Gandhi's: "the means are the ends." Communicating more awarely and compassionately can be satisfying ends in themselves, both emotionally and spiritually. They also build happier families and more successful businesses.

A brief summary of each challenge is given in the paragraphs that follow, along with some of the lifelong issues of personal development that are woven through each one. In Chapters One through Seven you will find expanded descriptions of each one, with discussions, examples, exercises and readings to help you explore each suggestion in action.

Challenge 1. Listen more carefully and responsively. Listen first and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't agree with it, before expressing your experience or point of view. In order to get more of your conversation partner's attention in tense situations, pay attention first: listen and give a brief restatement of what you have heard (especially feelings) before you express your own needs or position. The kind of listening recommended here separates acknowledging from approving or agreeing. Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings **does not have to mean** that you **approve of** or **agree with** that person's actions or way of experiencing, or that you will do whatever someone asks.

✘ Some of the deeper levels of this first step include learning to listen to your own heart, and learning to encounter identities and integrities quite different from your own, while still remaining centered in your own sense of self.

Challenge 2. Explain your conversational intent and invite consent. In order to help your conversation partner cooperate with you and to reduce possible misunderstandings, start important conversations by inviting your conversation partner to join you in the specific kind of conversation you want to have. The more the conversation is going to mean to you, the more important it is for your conversation partner to understand the big picture. Many successful communicators begin special conversations with a preface that goes something like: "*I would like to talk with you for a few minutes about [subject matter]. When would be a good time?*" The exercise for this step will encourage you to expand your list of possible conversations and to practice starting a wide variety of them.

✘ Some deeper levels of this second step include learning to be more aware of and honest about your intentions, gradually giving up intentions to injure, demean or punish, and learning to treat other people as consenting equals whose participation in conversation with us is a gift and not an obligation

Challenge 3. Express yourself more clearly and completely. Slow down and give your listeners more information about what you are experiencing by using a wide range of “I-statements.” One way to help get more of your listener’s empathy is to express more of the five basic dimensions of your experience: Here is an example using the five main “I-messages” identified by various researchers over the past half century: (Please read down the columns.)

The Five I-Messages = Five dimensions of experience	Example of a "Five I-Message" communication
1. What are you seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing?.	<i>"When I saw the dishes in the sink...</i>
2. What emotions are you feeling?	<i>...I felt irritated and impatient...</i>
3. What interpretations or wants of <u>yours</u> that support those feelings?	<i>...because I want to start cooking dinner right away...</i>
4. What action, information or commitment you want to request now?	<i>...and I want to ask you to help me do the dishes right now...</i>
5. What positive results will receiving that action, information or commitment lead to in the future?	<i>...so that dinner will be ready by the time Mike and Joe get here."</i>

Anytime one person sincerely listens to another, a very creative process is going on in which the listener mentally reconstructs the speaker’s experience. The more facets or dimensions of your experience you share with easy-to-grasp “I statements,” the easier it will be for your conversation partner to reconstruct your

experience accurately and understand what you are feeling. This is equally worthwhile whether you are trying to solve a problem with someone or trying to express appreciation for them. Expressing yourself this carefully might appear to take longer than your usual quick style of communication. But if you include all the time it takes to unscramble everyday misunderstandings, and to work through the feelings that usually accompany not being understood, expressing yourself more completely can actually take a lot less time.

✦ Some deeper levels of this third step include developing the courage to tell the truth, growing beyond blame in understanding painful experiences, and learning to make friends with feelings, your own and other people’s, too.

Challenge 4. Translate your (and other people’s) complaints and criticisms into specific requests, and explain your requests. In order to get more cooperation from others, whenever possible ask for what you want by using specific, action-oriented, positive language rather than by using generalizations, “why’s,” “don’ts” or “somebody should’s.” Help your listeners comply by explaining your requests with a “so that...”, “it would help me to... if you would...” or “in order to... .” Also, when you are receiving criticism and complaints from others, translate and restate the complaints as action requests.”).

✦ Some of the deeper levels of this fourth step include developing a strong enough sense of self-esteem that you can accept being turned down, and learning how to imagine creative solutions to problems, solutions in which everyone gets at least some of their needs met.

Challenge 5. Ask questions more “open-endedly” and more creatively. **“Open-endedly...”**: In order to coordinate our life and work with the lives and work of other people, we all need to know more of what other people are feeling and thinking, wanting and planning. But our usual “yes/no” questions actually tend to shut people up rather than opening them up. In order to encourage your conversation partners to share more of their thoughts and feelings, ask “open-ended” rather than “yes/no” questions. Open-

ended questions allow for a wide range of responses. For example, asking “How did you like that food/movie /speech/doctor/etc.?” will evoke a more detailed response than “Did you like it?” (which could be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”). In the first part of Challenge Five we explore asking a wide range of open-ended questions.

“and more creatively...” When we ask questions we are using a powerful language tool to *focus conversational attention* and *guide our interaction with others*. But many of the questions we have learned to ask are totally fruitless and self-defeating (such as, parents to a pregnant teen, “Why????!! Why have you done this to us????!!”). In general it will be more fruitful to ask “how” questions about the future rather than “why” questions about the past, but there are many more creative possibilities as well. Of the billions of questions we might ask, not all are equally fruitful or illuminating; not all are equally helpful in solving problems together. In the second part of Challenge Five we explore asking powerfully creative questions from many areas of life.

✦ Deeper levels of this fifth step include developing the courage to hear the answers to our questions, to face the truth of what other people are feeling. Also, learning to be comfortable with the process of looking at a situation from different perspectives, and learning to accept that people often have needs, views and tastes different from your own (I am not a bad person if you love eggplant and I can’t stand it).

Challenge 6. Express more appreciation. To build more satisfying relationships with the people around you, express more appreciation, delight, affirmation, encouragement and gratitude. Because life continually requires us to attend to problems and breakdowns, it gets very easy to see in life only what is broken and needs fixing. But satisfying relationships (and a happy life) require us to notice and respond to what is delightful, excellent, enjoyable, to work well done, to food well cooked, etc. It is appreciation that makes a relationship strong enough to accommodate differences and disagreements. Thinkers and

researchers in several different fields have reached similar conclusions about this: healthy relationships need a core of mutual appreciation.

✦ One deeper level of this sixth step is in how you might shift your overall level of appreciation and gratitude, toward other people, toward nature, and toward life and/or a “Higher Power.”

Challenge 7. Adopt the “continuous learning” approach to living. making better communication an important part of your everyday life. In order to have your new communication skills available in a wide variety of situations, you will need to practice them in as wide a variety of situations as possible, until, like driving or bicycling, they become “second nature.” The Seventh Challenge is to practice your evolving communication skills in everyday life, solving problems together, giving emotional support to the important people in your life, and enjoying how you are becoming a positive influence in your world. This challenge includes learning to see each conversation as an opportunity to grow in skill and awareness, each encounter as an opportunity to express more appreciation, each argument as an opportunity to translate your complaints into requests, and so on.

✦ One deeper level of this seventh step concerns learning to separate yourself from the current culture of violence, insult and injury, and learning how to create little islands of cooperation and mutuality, islands that you can gradually expand to include more and more of the people you encounter on your life journey.

Conclusion. The creative wave. I hope the information and exercises in this workbook will help you discover that listening and talking more consciously and cooperatively can be fun and rewarding. Just as guitar playing and basketball take great effort and bring great satisfaction, so does communicating more skillfully. As you begin to brighten up your worlds of family and work interaction with the new skills described here, you will be carrying forward the creative explorations of the many psychotherapists, teachers, scholars and peace activists whose inspiration and assistance have made this Workbook possible. .

